

Universality and the Analytic Unity of Apperception in Kant: a reading of CPR B133-4n

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ABSTRACT

I situate historically, analyze, and examine some of the implications of Kant's thesis that the analytic unity of apperception – the representation of the identity of the I think – is what transforms any representation to which it is attached into a universal (*conceptus communis*).

Kant's most revolutionary innovation in the theory of understanding was to treat self-consciousness – the unity of apperception – as more fundamental to the nature of understanding than any discursive operation such as conception, judgment, or reasoning. As such, the understanding not only underlies the possibility of cognitive experience and its objects but the possibility of thought itself – discursivity, representations by means of universals, be it cognitive or non-cognitive – and even the unity of the manifold in pure space and time. If interpreters have all but completely ignored these non-cognitive – or, better, pre-cognitive – roles of apperception/understanding, it is, in my view, because they mistakenly regard the categories as necessary conditions for unity of apperception. For being necessary conditions of the possibility of experience and its objects does not make the categories necessary conditions of apperception itself, and, on more than one occasion, Kant explicitly asserted the opposite: that the unity of apperception is presupposed both by the categories and the logical functions from which these concepts derive (B131, A401).¹

In this essay, I shall explore one of the pre-categorical roles of the unity of apperception in Kant's theory of understanding: its grounding of the possibility of understanding even in its general logical employment. I will show how the unity of apperception serves to extend the unrestrictedly universal scope of the logician's notion of logical universality from language to prelinguistic mentation, and does so without introducing the kind of abstraction to which Empiricists like Berkeley and Hume objected, or reverting to the kind of Platonistic intellectualism characteristic of the innatism of Descartes and Leibniz or the illuminationism of Malebranche. And, finally, I will consider how this innovation, when coupled with innate logical functions of judgment, opens the way to non-linguistic propositional thought, including, not least, synthetic a priori judgment.

A. Rationalist and Empiricist conceptions of universals

Prior to Kant, early modern exponents of the theory of ideas anchored linguistic universality in consciousness in either of two ways. According to the first, favored by Rationalists and modeled after Plato, there exist ideas of universal natures related to their instances as archetypes to ectypes. In the world outside our minds, the archetypes are ideas in the divine intellect and the ectypes created things. Within the mind, the archetypes, be they the divine ideas themselves (Spinoza, Malebranche) or innate ideas endowed by the creator in the image of the creator's own ideas (Descartes, Arnauld, Leibniz), are accessible to consciousness only non-sensibly, by means

¹In this essay, I shall abbreviate as AA volumes from the Prussian Academy edition of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, begun in 1901 but still ongoing. In addition, I shall employ the following abbreviations for particular works: A--/B-- (*Critique of Pure Reason*), PFM (*Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*), Logic (the Jäsche text), and THN (*A Treatise of Human Nature*) with pagination from the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch and the David Fate Norton editions separated by '/'.

of pure intellect, which employs them as patterns for molding sense experience into recognizable objects.

Descartes, for example, held that ideas innate to intellect are in one respect ectypes and in another archetypes. They are ectypal insofar as they are images of true and immutable natures in the divine intellect and archetypal insofar as they enable us to recognize, say, a piece of beeswax from one concatenation of sensory data (and any that resemble it), men in hats and coats crossing the square below from another, a circle from still another, and so on. Thus, ontological meaning (termed 'objective reality' by Descartes) can be accorded to linguistic universals only insofar as they correspond to images in the intellect of true and immutable natures in the divine mind. Otherwise, however indispensable to discourse, they are ontologically null – as arbitrary and convention-bound as rules of etiquette.

The second way of elucidating the mental underpinnings of linguistic universality, favored by Empiricists, is psychological. One begins by distinguishing one idea from another by discernment, comparing them with an eye to their differences, and finally abstracting from those differences (including individuating circumstances) so as to leave only that feature or features in which they resemble, be it in quality, structure, relation, cause, effect, or co-occurrence. The resulting abstract idea is then ready to be used as a universal to designate anything that resembles it in the relevant respect(s), however different otherwise; and this potential is actualized when the resemblance association is reinforced with sufficient frequency and constancy to ingrain a habit which thereafter lies ready to be triggered by any appropriately resembling stimulus. In this way, even a creature without language can, for example, recognize an apple as *an* apple by means of the habit triggered by sensing it, at least in the sense that it forms beliefs about what it perceives on the basis of its past experience of the resembling objects originally responsible for instilling the habit: that it is edible, how ripe it is, how it would taste, how it would behave if hurled, and so on.

Though Rationalists sometimes employed elements of the psychological account of universality to explain how we *perceive* and *operate* with the universal ideas of pure intellect, its attraction to Empiricists was that it offered a way to explain *universality itself* without having recourse to such ideas.² Instead of a special kind of idea, in itself universal and accessible only to pure intellect, they held universality to consist in a certain kind of significative *use* to which ordinary sensibly-derived ideas may be put. An idea, individual in itself, can be used to designate many resembling things indifferently, without singling any out, by supervening on a customary resemblance association; and by supervening on different such customs the very same idea can be used to designate different things that resemble it in different ways.³

This psychologizing of universality does, to be sure, create a gulf between linguistic universality and its mental correspondent. Linguistic universality, considered formally, without regard to content or context, is unrestricted in scope. That indeed is why it lends itself so well to quantificational analysis. It certainly does not, either implicitly or explicitly, limit the scope of a general term to all and only what speakers with a certain psychological endowment are capable of

²One could argue, however, that theists like Locke and Berkeley could not entirely escape the Platonic archetype model of universality since the intellect of God must know things as they really are, including universals such as essences and laws, without in any way relying on resemblance relations and habit, sensation (passive affection), or anything else specific to the psychology of finite minds.

³As Hume put it: 'If ideas be particular in their nature, and at the same time finite in their number, 'tis only by custom they can become general in their representation, and contain an infinite number in their representation... Nay so entire is the custom, that the very same idea may be annex'd to several different words, and may be employ'd in different reasonings, without any danger of mistake. Thus the idea of an equilateral triangle of an inch perpendicular may serve us in talking of a figure, of a rectilinear figure, of a regular figure, of a triangle, and of an equilateral triangle. All these terms, therefore, are in this case attended with the same idea; but as they are wont to be apply'd in a greater or lesser compass, they excite their particular habits, and thereby keep the mind in a readiness to observe, that no conclusion be form'd contrary to any ideas, which are usually compriz'd under them' (THN 24/21 and 21/20).

producing in their minds. Consequently, insofar as Empiricists accorded at most semantic but never ontological meaning to whatever in language cannot be underwritten by the acts and affects present to the conscious mind, linguistic universality is not so much explained as explained away on conceptions of mental universality like theirs. Kinds, laws, and other universals in language, to the extent they can be accorded any extra-linguistic significance at all, are reduced to mere psychological affairs of resemblance, abstraction from individuating circumstances, and customary association. Otherwise, they are just conventional contrivances, useful or even indispensable to human communication, but with nothing to anchor them in what, for Empiricists, is the only reality that can ever present itself to us: our own ideas.⁴

B. Kant's account of universals

At first sight, Kant's view of how language is anchored in consciousness may not seem very different from those of the Empiricists, at least when considered from the vantage of pure general logic. Like them, Kant held that 'we can understand nothing except what carries with it a correspondent in intuition to our words' (A277/B333). How one advances from sensible intuitions to general representations (discursivity) he explained in similar fashion. Concepts have both a matter – the object (contents) thought in them – and a form, universality, understood as the representation of what is common to things that may otherwise be quite different. From the standpoint of what he termed 'pure general logic,' where the matter of concepts is disregarded and only their form as universals considered, Kant explained the acquisition of concepts from intuitions as follows:

In order to make concepts from representations, one thus has to be able to *compare, reflect,* and *abstract*; for these three logical operations of the understanding are the essential and universal conditions for the generation of any concept whatsoever. – I see, e.g., a spruce, a willow, and a linden. By first of all comparing these objects to one another, I observe that they differ from one another in respect of their trunk, the branches, the leaves, and such like; but next I reflect on what they have in common, trunk, branches, and leaves themselves, and abstract from their size, shape, etc.; thus do I obtain the concept of a tree. (L 94-5)

Comparison consists in discerning the distinguishable features of each sensible object and noting how they differ from those of other objects; reflection detects those features in which the objects compared resemble; and finally, when abstraction is made from the differences, the resemblances that remain are ready for employment as a concept.

Also in common with the Empiricists, Kant conceived of abstraction as leaving out of consideration. The representation considered retains its character as an individual apprehended in intuition – its myriad qualities, relations, and everything else about it are unaffected by abstraction. The abstracting subject simply attends to certain features while ignoring others, and then uses the contents thus isolated as a standard to sort through its other representations, ranking under it those that resemble it in all and only those features it considers (regardless of how they otherwise differ), while excluding all the rest. Other concepts can be produced from the same sensible individual simply by considering different features and leaving others out of consideration. And, in principle, the reflecting subject can derive as many concepts from a given intuition as there are features to consider and leave out of consideration.

Up to this point, then, the only noteworthy difference between Kant's account of universality and the sort advanced by Berkeley and Hume is the exclusion of custom. Custom closes a gap that arises because comparisons with an eye to resemblances have to be performed one at a time and so cannot explain how universals come to represent *all* ideas that resemble

⁴The discussion in this section is based on my book, *Kant and the Empiricists*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

them, actual or possible, whether comparisons are performed or not.⁵ The solution advanced by Berkeley and adapted by Hume was to explicate the idea of logical universality in terms not of actual but possible comparisons by tracing it to the idea of the *power* to perform them. The power to perform comparisons with a given abstract idea extends to every possible idea, and so permits one to conceive the scope of the abstracted idea as extending to all, some, or none of the infinite totality of possible ideas. And ‘power’, in this context, Berkeley and Hume explicated in terms of customary association in relations of resemblance: habits that lie in readiness to be triggered by any perception that possesses all the features represented in the idea employed as a standard of comparison, however much it may differ otherwise.

Kant, however, obviated the need for customary association by proposing a revolutionary new account of the mental underpinnings of logical universality. Its clearest and most developed statement is a footnote in §16 of the B edition Transcendental Deduction of the Categories according to which the I think, *qua* analytic unity of apperception, is constitutive of logical universality. The reasoning that leads to this conclusion starts from the premise, first, that ‘The I think must be *able* to accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say the representations would either be impossible or at least be nothing for me,’ and, second, that this requires that the manifold of all possible sensible intuitions, ‘ahead of all thought,’ have ‘a necessary relation to the I think in the same subject in which this manifold is found’ (B131-2). On this basis, Kant advanced what is perhaps the most fundamental and important thesis of his critical philosophy: ‘it is only because I can combine a manifold of given representations *in one consciousness* that it is possible for me to represent to myself the *identity of the consciousness in these representations*, that is, the *analytic* unity of apperception is possible only on the presupposition of some such *synthetic* unity’ (B133). To be able to represent the *identity* of consciousness in respect of all the manifold, and so represent *one and the same* I think as able to accompany each and every one of my possible representations – the analytic unity of apperception – I must already have united, by synthetic combination, all sensible representations in one and the same consciousness – synthetic unity of apperception. Any representations that cannot be brought within the unity of this consciousness, even if they are not impossible, can be nothing to *me*, and so, as far as my thinking and action are concerned, may as well be nothing.

Having determined the a priori relation of the unity of consciousness to the representation of its identity, Kant appended the following footnote:

The analytic unity of consciousness attaches to all common concepts as such, e.g., if I think *red* in general, then I represent thereby a feature that, as a characteristic mark, can be met with in something or combined with other representations; hence, only by means of a pre-thought possible synthetic unity can I represent the analytic unity. A representation that is to be thought as common to *differing* representations is regarded as belonging to such as have, besides it, something *different* in them; consequently, it must be thought previously in synthetic unity with other (albeit only possible representations), before I can think in it the analytic unity of consciousness that makes it into a *conceptus communis*. And thus the synthetic unity of apperception is the highest point to which all employment of the understanding, even the whole of logic, and in accordance with it, transcendental philosophy, must be attached, indeed this capacity is the understanding itself. (B133-4n)

⁵Rationalists avoided the difficulty because, on their view, logically universal ideas can be directly apprehended by the intellect and employed as standards in individual acts of comparison, and among these ideas, presumably, is the idea of logical universality itself. The whole point of an Empiricist account, by contrast, is to explain how our minds can acquire an idea of logical universality, or at least of something that approximates it, by means of the senses and imagination alone, without recourse to anything supposed to be accessible only to pure intellect (e.g. THN 72/52 and 638/39).

Among the many things that makes this inexplicably neglected footnote of special importance for comprehending Kant's theory of understanding is that its focus is on apperception as the ground of pure general logic and not, as nearly everywhere else in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, its role in the transcendental theory of cognitive experience.⁶ This means that it is not concerned with concepts as representations of cognizable objects, where 'object' is understood as 'that in the concept of which the manifold of given intuition is *united*' (B137; also A104-8, A190-1/B235-6, and A494/B522). Instead, it abstracts completely from all content of concepts (the determinations thought in the categories not excepted) and focuses solely on their logical form as universals capable of being met with in, and so as common to (*conceptus communis*), representations that may otherwise differ. In short, the purely general logical context of the role accorded to the analytic unity of apperception in the B133-4 footnote makes it a matter of complete indifference whether a concept is objective or subjective, cognitive or non-cognitive, whether it represents a determination of space or time, a number, a color, a dread, a desire, a duty, freedom, God, a something in general, a nothing, or even whether or not it is internally self-contradictory.

The crux of Kant's explication of logical universality is that the analytic unity of the I think, in being able to *accompany* all possible representations a priori, is ipso facto *common* to them all, and so is aptly described as the pure form of logical universality as such. It is also purely mental because nothing is at issue here except the representation of the identity of consciousness – the analytic unity of the I think – made possible by the synthetic unity of the manifold of intuition in one consciousness *ahead of all thought*, and so prior to and independently of all concepts and, *a fortiori*, all judgments, whether linguistic or not. This is what makes the I think 'the vehicle of all concepts' (A341/B399-4100): anything sensible representation that I think, simply by virtue of its being *me* thinking it, partakes of the universality of the the analytic unity of apperception and so ceases to count as individual and instead takes on the value of a universal, that is, a representation whose scope, like that of the I think, extends to all possible representations and, again like the I think, is, potentially at least, common to them all possible.

I say 'potentially' because, like Kant's example of the concept of red that results when the I think attaches to the sensation of red, few if any representations, other than the I think itself, are, *in truth*, common to every possible representation. Yet, from a purely general logical point of view, what is or is not true is of no concern since it relates to the content of concepts and not just their form. Instead, all that matters is that representations, simply by virtue of being thought by *me*, acquire the logical *form* of universality proper to the analytic unity of apperception.

There is, to be sure, a sense in which the scope of the universality constituted by the analytic unity of the I think is not unqualifiedly universal. The synthetic unity of apperception it presupposes encompasses only representations, not things in themselves; and Kant did not quite preclude the possibility that representations can occur that do not belong to this unity, insisting only that such representations, like things in themselves, could be nothing to *me* (B131). Yet, for precisely this reason, these restrictions on its scope are not really restrictions at all. For how would understanding be handicapped if what is nothing to it, and to which it is condemned by the conditions of its possibility to be forever oblivious, is excluded from the scope of its thought? And does the scope of linguistic universality extend farther? Even in respect of language any such distinction in scope would seem to be a distinction without a difference. Since everything that can be anything to me is included within the scope of the analytic unity of consciousness, it thus seems sufficient to ground linguistic universality.

What then is the synthetic unity of apperception that precedes and makes possible the analytic unity of the I think? Because the latter is essential to all concepts, and so to all judgment (propositional thought) as well, it can consist of nothing but sensible representations. Since the only a priori unity of sensible representations that is in place 'ahead of all thought' (B132) is that

⁶The part of transcendental philosophy that goes deeper even than general logic coincides with the subjective transcendental deduction of the categories, while the transcendental theory of cognition is the topic of the less fundamental objective deduction: see Axvi-xvii.

of the manifold in pure space and time, the manifold contained in these intuitions, and united in the consciousness of them, seems to be the only candidate. Moreover, while Kant did not explicitly equate the synthetic unity presupposed by the analytic unity of apperception with that of pure space and time in the B133-4 footnote, it is probably no coincidence that he took the occasion in the very next footnote to make explicit that the unity of consciousness met with in the pure space and time of the Transcendental Aesthetic is ‘synthetic yet also original’ (B136n; see also A99-10, A107, B140, and B160n). And one cannot help being struck by how well their equation dovetails with the argument of §16 (B131-5) since it would mean that the only representations that could not be anything for *me* would be precisely those that, by failing to conform to pure space and time, cannot be given in intuition – cannot appear, cannot be apprehended – at all.

C. The I think as copula of possible judgments

With logical universality extended from language to mind, the way was opened for Kant to posit purely mental propositional thought (judgment) as well. All that is needed is a means of relating one concept to another, and thereby combining them to form a single, conjoint representation. For if distinct universals were isolated from one another, incapable of being united, attaching the analytic unity of the I think to anything would bring no representational gain, and in particular nothing to affirm or deny, and so too nothing to which truth or falsity could be ascribed. Accordingly, the analytic unity of the I think must be supplemented by innate logical functions that enable representations to which the I think is attached to be united in judgments in much the same way the innate sensible forms posited in the Transcendental Aesthetic meet the need to bring together the manifold data of the senses in intuitions.⁷

In beings constituted like ourselves, the form that enables distinct, otherwise unrelatable concepts to be united is that of *categorical judgment*, where one concept is related to another as predicate to subject. This relation also has quantitative and qualitative logical components, that determine the predication as *universal*, *particular*, or *singular*, and as *affirmative*, *negative*, or *infinite*. The addition of these forms transforms the I think from merely being the form of logical universality to being the *copula* of judgments (B141-2, AA 22 91 and 96). For it is only insofar as the I think attaches to representations that they can be united as subjective and predicate of variously quantified and qualified categorical judgments. (B141-2).⁸ Other logical forms transform it further. For once judgments are formed, some means of relating them must exist as well, since otherwise not only would it be impossible to form complex judgments (judgments that relate judgments rather than merely concepts), inference from one judgment to another could not take place. Accordingly, Kant posited logical functions of judgment that permit not only concepts but the judgments formed from them to be combined: the logical form of hypothetical judgment, in which judgments are combined as ground and consequent, and disjunctive logical form, in which they are combined insofar as their subjects (or predicates) divide up the sphere of the subject (or predicate) of another judgment. And since it is only insofar as the analytic unity of the I think confers its universal scope on judgments that they are fit to enter into these relations, the I think plays the same mediating role in complex judgment and inferences that it does as the copula of categorical judgments (‘What the *copula* is for categorical judgments, the *consequentia* is for hypotheticals,’ L 105).

Whether or not logical functions other than those characteristic of our understanding are possible Kant did not think could be known (B145-6, A230/B283, *Progress* 272). Nor,

⁷Indeed, Kant drew this very analogy: ‘Logical form is to the intellectual representation of things precisely what space and time are for the appearances of a thing: namely, they contain the places for ordering them’ (AA 17 §4629 [early 1770s]).

⁸This, I believe, underlies Kant’s claim that the ‘is’ of predication can itself be understood as a predicate: ‘[T]he little word “is” is not still another predicate on top of these, but only what sets the predicate in *relation* (*beziehungsweise*) to the subject’ (A598-9/B626-7).

presumably, would he have claimed to know whether there are still higher level logical functions that combine complex judgments to form an entirely new kind of logical unity, quite beyond our ken (whereas, with the present constitution of our minds, we must instead content ourselves with the capacity of reason to represent judgments of a certain kind as a totality by means of ideas). In any case, what is essential is not *which* logical forms characterize the constitution of the understanding but only its possession of *some* such forms by which to relate concepts and judgments that would otherwise be unrelatable and of no representational worth whatsoever.

Conclusion

Until the capacity to represent universality by accompanying representations with the analytic unity of the I think is realized, all representations in the mind are aesthetic in character: impressions of sense (sensations, self-affections), outer and inner appearances, and their reproductions in imagination. Their manifoldness (pure and empirical synthesis of apprehension) and all relation of that manifold, be it a priori (productive synthesis) or a posteriori (association), is exclusively the work of imagination. The universal scope of the I think as analytic unity of apperception can thus play no representational role here since only intuitions, not concepts, are relatable by means of imagination. It therefore needs to be understood as a strictly logical I, not an aesthetic one: the analytic unity of apperception can merely accompany, not relate, aesthetic representations; a copula only of judgments, not syntheses of imagination.⁹

Yet, for precisely this reason, the advent of judgments marks a fundamental transformation in our representation. Sensibility is oblivious to what is represented in judgments; their objects do not appear and cannot be apprehended in intuition. Insofar as experience, as Kant understood it, consists of judgments (PFM 304, AA 18 §§ 5661 and 5923), its objects are not sensible, immediately intuitable appearances at all, but rather phenomena cognized *through* appearances by means of universals, and so objects that exist only in and through discursive understanding.

How this enables the understanding to become the author of nature itself (B127, A114, A125-8, B163-5, PFM 318-20) lies beyond scope of this paper. For present purposes it suffices to recognize the logical significance of the transformation Kant wrought by extending propositional form from language to mentation. The mental propositions of the Empiricists differ fundamentally from verbal ones: not only do they exclude ‘rules of propriety’ (conventions) but grammatical and logical form as well, and so fall well within the capacity of imagination (i.e. aesthetic representation for Kant), including the powers of animal minds. By contrast, Kant’s ability to account for genuine universals in the mind by means of the analytic unity of apperception enabled him to ascribe logical form to mental propositions, so that they can be conceived to be both isomorphic with language and beyond the capacity of animals (‘Animals too have *apprehensiones* but not *apperceptiones*; hence, they cannot make their representations universal,’ AA 15 §411 [early 1770s]). Thus, in a manner fully consistent with the commitment to the sensible origin of all representational content that he shared with the Empiricists, Kant was able to explain the mental underpinnings of pure general logic that open the way for a solution to the problem of transcendental philosophy: how is the *mind* capable of forming synthetic a priori judgments and applying them to perceptible realities?

⁹This is why ‘The identity of the consciousness of myself in distinct times is thus only a formal condition of my thoughts and their interrelation (*Zusammenhang*) but in no way proves the numerical identity of my subject in which, notwithstanding the logical identity of the I, change of such a kind can be present that does not allow its identity to be maintained. Despite this, we can still always ascribe to it the same-sounding I which, in each distinct state and even one involving a change of subject, could yet keep the thoughts of the preceding subject going and thus carry them over to the succeeding one’ (A363). The I would be a being in time if it related intuitions as well as concepts.

